

The Assessment Edict and the Love of Teaching

by Gregg Primo Ventello

For years now, administrators have been asking faculty to document how they assess their teaching methods and their students' learning. At my college, faculty are required to design an assessment project for each semester and report to the director of assessment the objectives and results of that project on a standardized form. The majority of us begrudgingly complete this task, but it is not assessment that we oppose. It is the edict requiring us to document it officially that irritates even the most tractable among us.

One reason faculty are bothered by these requirements is that we do not need to be told to assess. As professional educators, the need to know how we are doing is part of a teacher's fiber of being. We constantly assess ourselves and our students because we love our content. How well we convey that content to our students deeply concerns us. Assessment, for a teacher, is an internal requirement.

The origin of this internal requirement is what the Greeks called "eros"—the force that pulls us toward everything good, true, and beautiful—which can be defined as passion for work (any work), whether it's teaching calculus, playing the saxophone, or painting a house. Eros is the reason I fill with unabated joy when doing the work that I love. It is what causes time to fly while we're engaged, and what causes time to stop when we're forced to do work that is, as Audre Lorde put it, "a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread." Yes, we all must do things we'd rather not do, but we do them because they are necessary. The problem emerges when what we don't want to do is *unnecessary*.

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Eros is why we assess our teaching on some level throughout our professional day. Faculty do not understand what there is to gain by submitting a report on what we already do to an assessment official who does not have the same interests. Proponents of documentation often respond by saying, “If faculty are constantly assessing their teaching and their students, it should be easy to document.” Indeed, they are right. It is easy, but this does not answer the question of why it needs to be documented. If there is a demand to write it down, we will; but often the most productive plan of action emerges through conversation with a colleague or mentor who shares our passion for the content and its pedagogy.

We complete our assessment projects and submit the requisite paperwork, but the eros in us can't help but wonder whether the time it took us to do the report was well spent. We continually push ourselves to be better at what we do, and this is why we are concerned with how we use our time. We know that our time is best spent engaged in the work that we love, so when asked to do something that is redundant and unnecessary, we ask “why.” Our irritation is left to fester because no one satisfactorily answers this question. Instead, we often get a sermon about why assessment is important. We already know it's important; as I said, we are bound to do it. So now, even the most obedient among us feels resistant because it appears that the request for documentation is really about a centralized power misunderstanding our commitment as professional teachers.

The most useful assessment comes from an evaluator with expertise in the content area. Assessment officials are aware of this fact and encourage us to design projects that are meaningful to us. However, this creates a gap between my understanding of what I am doing, and the assessment official's understanding of



what I am doing. It was this gap that caused the director of assessment at my college to request a meeting with me (as she did with several of my colleagues), so that I could clarify my assessment project for her. After my explanation, she responded with, “Wow, that’s huge.” It wasn’t, in fact, huge. It was that I’d designed a project to help me gain meaningful information about my teaching of a content that she knew little about. During the rest of the meeting, she suggested other strategies that made it clear to me that she would have preferred I administer a simple pre-test and post-test. This would have enabled her to comply with bureaucratic requirements, but would have offered me little substantive informa-

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tion to help me improve my teaching.

My heart goes out to assessment directors because they’re caught in the cross-fire. It’s an impossible job, and this is likely the reason my college has had to fill the position five times in the last eight years. Faculty have been told that we must complete an assessment report to “demonstrate that learning is taking place,” that it is occurring in the classroom. In my experience, these officials can only consider how best to alter a project for the purposes of reporting it up the line.

Even if these reports do demonstrate to these officials that learning is taking place, why must it be documented? What is it that we are ultimately trying to accomplish through documentation? The answer to this question is becoming increasingly clear. Requiring documentation of assessment is an inadequate attempt to hold educators “accountable.” We have manufactured a method to demonstrate our “worth” because what we do doesn’t lend itself easily to quantitative measure. There are no financial statements that give evidence of a teacher’s solvency in the classroom. Teachers can’t be measured by the number of sales we’ve closed, or the amount of revenue we’ve generated. Nevertheless, the official documentation of assessment is an attempt to quantify our work in a profit-oriented capitalist culture that knows no other way to measure success than by counting it.

Teachers have chosen a path that promises neither material reward nor prestige. We teach because our profession fulfills us in ways that are often hard to measure or articulate, in ways that can’t be boiled down to what can be counted. A colleague once likened this question to being asked why you fell in love with your spouse. You can come up with practical things—he does housework, she’s a great parent—but there is something deeper than this that defies a rationale. In the same vein, asking me to give evidence that I am assessing my teaching and my

students' learning is akin to having an in-law ask me what my wife's middle name is or what her birth date is. What's the point? In this case, knowledge of certain facts doesn't equate to love, although that seems to be the intent.

A parallel exists with assessment. When I'm asked to document assessment, I feel mildly violated. There is an element of distrust, of suspicion and doubt, in asking for documentation. The American perspective, based on capitalism, is that only within a system fostering competition will individuals strive to improve. "Teachers?" the argument goes, "They work in a non-profit setting. What possi-

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ble incentive do teachers have to improve?" In response, we've created a system that appears to hold teachers "accountable."

So, I am resistant to the formal documentation of assessment. I admit, though, that my resistance is passive. I have done what has been asked of me. I have submitted an assessment report for every semester I have taught at my college; I have copies neatly filed away in chronological order; and I will continue to do what is asked of me because fighting it is not worth jeopardizing a job in which I get to do what I love to do.

A different version of this article, entitled The Anti-Assessment Manifesto, by Gregg Primo Ventello appeared in the online journal TCRecord.org (www.tcrecord.org/search.asp?kw=ventello&x=34&y=9) June 4, 2008.